

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



# Henry Gerber House

1710 N. Crilly Ct.

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**Designated a Chicago Landmark on June 6, 2001**



**CITY OF CHICAGO**  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development  
Alicia Mazur Berg, Commissioner



# PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

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Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in December 2000

## Henry Gerber House 1710 N. Crilly Ct.

A small 2½-story residence, 1710 Crilly Court is one of a group of similar historic Queen Anne row houses built in 1885 in what is now the Old Town Triangle, a Chicago Landmark District. This building, however, is also distinguished as the home in 1924-25 of pioneering gay civil-rights activist Henry Gerber (1892-1972). From this house Gerber led the formation of the Society for Human Rights (founded in 1924), the first American gay civil-rights organization, and whose newsletter, *Friendship and Freedom*, was the first documented gay rights publication in the United States.

The organization was short-lived, disbanding within less than a year of its incorporation. Another 25 years would pass before the next attempt in 1950 to form an American gay civil-rights group, and it would not be until 1969 that the modern gay and lesbian civil-rights movement would be ushered in by “Stonewall”—the name given the “uprising” of gay men and lesbians against police harassment and brutality in New York City’s Greenwich Village following a police raid on a gay bar, the Stonewall Inn. The Henry Gerber House remains a testament to the first of these efforts during the pre-Stonewall era to gain gay men and lesbians civil rights at a time when homosexuals routinely faced discrimination, harassment, and imprisonment.

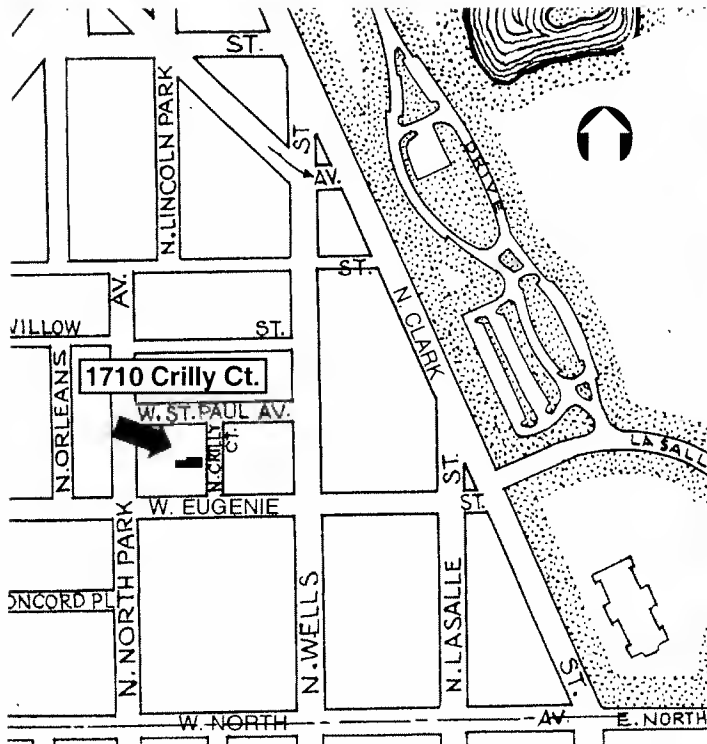
### *HENRY GERBER (1892-1972)*

Henry Gerber was born Joseph Henry Dittmar in Bavaria, Germany, on June 29, 1892. In 1913 at age 21, he emigrated with his family to the United States (changing his name at Ellis Island) and ended up in Chicago, where there was a large German community. He initially worked at Montgomery Ward’s, but with the outbreak of World War I was interned as an enemy alien, along with many other German immigrants, and given the option of military service. After the war he served from 1920 to 1923 with the U.S. Army of Occupation in Germany at Coblenz.

It was during this time that Gerber first identified himself as homosexual, and while in Germany he immersed himself in the extensive gay civil-rights movement there. He subscribed to several gay periodicals (including one which was said to have a weekly subscription of 100,000) and may have worked on some of them. He made many trips to



Pioneering gay civil-rights activist Henry Gerber (above, c.1930s) lived from 1924-25 at 1710 N. Crilly Ct. (map), a small 2½-story Queen Anne row house (left and below) in the Old Town Triangle district.



Berlin and was in contact with the leading gay civil-rights organizations, including the Society for Human Rights (founded in 1919 and the largest such organization at that time), and the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, the first-ever gay civil-rights group. The Committee was founded by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld in 1897 to lobby for the repeal of Germany's sodomy laws, and by the 1920s Hirschfeld was the leading advocate for gay rights in Europe.

After leaving the Army, Gerber returned to Chicago frustrated to find no similar movement in the United States but emboldened to start one. In the 1920s Chicago had a significant gay subculture, albeit one comprised of multiple social networks, different for gay men and lesbians as well as for race and class. Working-class gay men like Gerber would have frequented the Near North neighborhoods of Washington Square and "Towertown" (named for the Water Tower), with their many nightclubs, bars, boarding houses, and residence hotels. But since homosexuality was illegal, gay men and lesbians developed a clandestine existence of "double lives," underground social clubs, and a system of dress and speech codes to recognize each other. To publicly identify oneself as homosexual was not only unheard of, but was to risk certain public hostility, including loss of employment and housing, harassment, imprisonment, and even physical harm.

### *SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS*

Gerber wanted to start an organization patterned after the ones he was familiar with in Germany. He wrote a "Declaration of Purpose" for his new organization, the "Society for Human Rights," taking the English name of one of the German groups. The Society would advocate for gay civil rights and the appeal of sodomy laws, educate the public about homosexuality, and help "ameliorate the plight of homosexuals" in this country.

Gerber appealed to his gay friends and wrote letters to prominent individuals and medical authorities to request support, all (understandably for the time) without much success. Undeterred, he convinced six individuals to become the national officers of the Society. In his own account written in 1962, Gerber described his fellow officers as poor, mostly illiterate gay men, not the upstanding and influential persons he thought necessary for an effective organization—but, just the same, they were apparently willing to risk publicly identifying themselves as homosexuals.

The Society for Human Rights was incorporated by State of Illinois charter on December 10, 1924, with a purposefully ambiguous purpose:

to promote and to protect interests of people who by reasons of mental and physical abnormalities are abused and hindered in the legal pursuit of happiness which is guaranteed them by the Declaration of Independence, and to combat the public prejudices against them by dissemination of facts according to modern science among intellectuals of mature age. The Society stands only for law and order; it is in harmony with any and all general laws insofar as they protect the rights of others, and does in no manner recommend any acts in violation of present laws or advocate any matter inimical to the public welfare.

As the secretary of the Society, Gerber's apartment served as the Society's "headquarters." At the time of its incorporation in 1924, Gerber lived at 1710 Crilly



From his house at 1710 N. Crilly Ct. (left) in 1924 Gerber led the formation of the Society for Human Rights (State charter, following page), the first American gay civil-rights organization. He also published a newsletter, *Friendship and Freedom*, the first documented gay rights periodical in the United States (below, center of photo with German gay rights publications from the 1920s).

The Henry Gerber House was the organization's first headquarters, where meetings were held and Gerber wrote at least the first of the two issues produced of the newsletter. The organization was short-lived, disbanding within less than a year of its incorporation.





Court, probably renting a room or a basement apartment. The Crilly Court address appears on the State of Illinois charter as the Society's business address, and it was here that Gerber would have led meetings and wrote at least the first of the two issues produced of the Society's newsletter, *Friendship and Freedom* (again, the name is taken from a German publication). According to Gerber's writings, he envisioned the newsletter as a way to rally the gay community around the Society's efforts, and *Friendship and Freedom* represents the first-documented gay periodical in America. (It is unclear how many copies were produced or how it was distributed. No copies are known to exist, although a copy of the newsletter is pictured in a photograph of German gay rights publications from the period.)

At some point in the months after the Society's incorporation, Gerber moved to an apartment at 34 E. Oak St. (now demolished). According to Gerber's own account in 1962, it was here that the police (possibly in July of 1925) raided his apartment without a warrant and, accompanied by a reporter from Hearst's *Chicago Examiner*, seized his typewriter, all materials pertaining to the Society, and his personal diaries—effectively marking the abrupt end of the nation's first gay-rights organization. Unbeknownst to Gerber, one of the Society's other officers had a wife and two children, and the wife reported her husband's homosexual activities to a social worker who in turn reported him to the police. When the police arrested the man, they apparently found a copy of the newsletter and forced him to reveal information about the Society, subsequently arresting all of its officers. (Gerber states that a front-page story sensationalizing the arrest appeared in the next day's paper, but the existence of the story has yet to be verified.)

Again according to Gerber, the "evidence" of his homosexuality produced at trial consisted of a powder puff (Gerber denied that it was his, and claimed it had been planted) and selected excerpts from his diary. In addition, there were charges that his newsletter was "obscene" (a charge Gerber also denied). After two trials, a second judge dismissed Gerber's case, citing the lack of a warrant, and ordered all of Gerber's property returned, although he never received his diaries or any of the materials pertaining to the Society.

#### *HENRY GERBER: LATER YEARS*

As a result of the arrest, Gerber was dismissed from his job at the post office for "conduct unbecoming a postal worker." He left Chicago for New York City where he reenlisted in the Army and served some 17 more years stationed at Governor's Island. He later retired to the Soldier's Home in Washington, D.C., where he died on December 31, 1972, at the age of 80.

By Gerber's own account, he became increasingly cautious and embittered following his experience in Chicago and the lack of support for his efforts by other homosexuals. Throughout his life, however, he continued to work to promote gay civil rights in other ways. He wrote articles for German gay rights publications in the 1920s, and in the 1930s he managed a national gay pen-pals club called "Contacts" and helped produce a literary magazine, *Chanticleer*, for which he wrote several pro-gay articles. He responded to anti-homosexual articles in national journals in the 1930s-40s (often writing anonymously or using a pseudonym), and he is believed to have written four books, an



autobiography, and volumes on such topics as ethics and religion (these disclose atheistic and sometimes sexist attitudes), all apparently lost.

Gerber attempted to start a new gay rights group in the 1940s, the “Society Scouting Sex Superstition: An Underground International Movement Fighting Fascism in Sex.” In the group’s objectives one senses Gerber’s growing sense of pessimism and frustration at his lack of success to date: “[to] fight legal persecution, to fight religious dogma that says sex is sinful, to do something about the ‘dirt trade’ and other extortionists, including those in the police force, and to answer press slanders of homosexuals.” He wrote several long letters apparently as a “call to arms” to major newspapers, none of which appear to have been published, and the effort fizzled.

In 1956 Gerber was also briefly involved in the New York Chapter of the Mattachine Society, begun in 1950 by Harry Hay in Los Angeles and the first American gay civil-rights organization after Chicago’s Society for Human Rights. (The Mattachine Society was composed predominantly of gay men, although Chicago’s Pearl Hart was involved in the founding of a Chicago chapter in 1965. The Daughters of Bilitis, begun in 1955, was the first national lesbian rights group.)

Gerber corresponded with many leaders in the pre-Stonewall gay rights movement in the 1940s-60s, among them Dorr Legg who in Los Angeles in the 1950s had founded ONE, another early gay rights organization. ONE published a magazine which was deemed “obscene” by the postal service in 1954, a charge overturned in a landmark Supreme Court decision. Gerber contributed articles to ONE, including his 1962 first-person account of the founding of the Society for Human Rights and a translation of Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld’s monumental encyclopedia on homosexuality.

The significance of the formation of the Society for Human Rights by Henry Gerber in Chicago in 1924 went unnoticed at the time, and was largely forgotten until its “rediscovery” and inclusion in Jonathan Katz’s landmark 1976 book, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*—but it has since been recognized as a pioneering and remarkable effort by someone who has been termed the “forgotten grandfather” of the modern gay rights movement.

### ***BUILDING DESCRIPTION***

The row house at 1710 N. Crilly Court is a small Queen Anne residence built as part of a group of row houses in 1885. The 2½-story masonry building is clad with stone and has an ornamental gable roof and cornice. The building was constructed by Daniel F. Crilly who purchased several acres of the surrounding area in 1885 and proceeded to lay out streets and develop it with row houses and apartment buildings over several years. The building is a contributing structure in the Old Town Triangle, which was designated a Chicago Landmark District in 1977.

### **CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION**

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure or district if the

Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for landmark designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Henry Gerber House be designated as a Chicago Landmark:

***Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City’s History***

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspects of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois or the United States.*

The Henry Gerber House at 1710 N. Crilly Court, home to pioneering gay civil-rights activist Henry Gerber from 1924 to 1925, is nationally significant as the “starting point” of the gay and lesbian civil-rights movement in the United States. From this house in 1924 Gerber organized and formed the nation’s first gay civil-rights organization, the Society for Human Rights, some 25 years before the next successful attempt at forming a gay rights organization and 44 years before the Stonewall “uprising” in New York City which signaled the emergence of the modern gay rights movement.

While the organization was short-lived, disbanding within a year of its incorporation, the Henry Gerber House remains a testament to the first of these efforts during the pre-Stonewall era to gain gay men and lesbians civil rights at a time when homosexuals routinely faced discrimination, harassment, and imprisonment. The historic importance of Henry Gerber and the Society of Human Rights have been recognized by the Chicago gay press as well as national gay periodicals like *The Advocate* and numerous books and articles on the gay civil-rights movement and history.

***Criterion 2: Significant Historic Event***

*Its location as a site of a significant historic event which may or may not have taken place within or involved the use of any existing improvements.*

The Henry Gerber House served as the founding “headquarters” of the Society for Human Rights, the nation’s first gay civil-rights organization. It was here in 1924 that Henry Gerber organized and formed the Society, held meetings, and wrote at least the first of the two issues he produced of the Society’s newsletter, *Friendship and Freedom*, the first-documented gay periodical in America. The Crilly Court address appears on the State of Illinois charter as the Society’s business address

Within less than a year of its incorporation, Gerber had moved and the Society was disbanded, but the Henry Gerber House and the events it represents nonetheless mark an important and historically-significant moment in the gay and lesbian civil-rights movement and history. The historic significance of Henry Gerber and the founding of the Society for Human Rights has been recognized in numerous gay and lesbian publications both locally and nationally, including the *Chicago Free Press* which cited it as one of the ten-most significant events in the last 100 years of Chicago gay and lesbian history.

### ***Criterion 3: Significant Person***

*Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

Henry Gerber was a pioneering gay civil-rights activist who in this house in 1924 to 1925 founded the nation's first gay civil-rights organization and published the nation's first-documented gay periodical. Throughout his life he continued to work to promote gay civil rights, writing articles for both the gay and mainstream press, corresponding with leaders of the pre-Stonewall gay rights movement, and supporting other early gay rights organizations.

Gerber's contributions to the gay and lesbian civil-rights movement have been nationally recognized. The Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive located here in Chicago was renamed for Henry Gerber and pioneering female civil rights attorney Pearl Hart (Gerber/Hart Library) to honor the significant contributions of these individuals to the gay and lesbian community. For his work Henry Gerber has been termed the "forgotten grandfather" of the modern gay rights movement.

### ***Integrity Criterion***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.*

The Henry Gerber House is virtually unaltered on the exterior from its historic 1885 appearance, which is what it would have also looked like in 1924-25 when Henry Gerber lived here. As the initial "headquarters" of the Society for Human Rights and the original business address for the organization, this building has the closest historical associations with Henry Gerber and the Society.

## **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Henry Gerber House, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior elevations and rooflines of the building visible from public rights-of-way.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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### Illustrations

Henry Gerber (c.1930s): Chicago Historical Society, Gregory Sprague Collection.

Charter and early newsletters, reproduced from *Gay American History*.

Building photos and map: Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

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*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 33 N. LaSalle St., Room 1600, Chicago, IL 60602; phone (312-744-3200); TDD (312-744-2958); fax (312-744-9140); Web site, <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/landmarks>. This Preliminary Summary of Information is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the Commission's final recommendation should be regarded as final.*

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